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Editor's Introduction

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To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the National Collegiate Honors Council, *JNCHC* invited honors deans and directors to ask the president of their institution to submit an essay on the theme "The Value of Honors." This special Forum was an opportunity for honors administrators to discuss honors with their presidents and an opportunity for presidents to reflect in writing on the value of honors at their institution and in the wider context of higher education.

The lead essay for the Forum, called "Thinking and Rethinking: The Practical Value of an Honors Education," was distributed in advance to promote reflection on the theme. The author of the essay is James Herbert, who began his career teaching in a general honors program and went on to serve in positions at the College Board, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, the European Science Foundation, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK), and the University of Cambridge. Herbert describes the critical and reflective practices he learned in honors and how these practices benefited his on-the-job experiences at the College Board and NEH.

"The stakes were huge" in many of the decisions that Herbert was charged to make, potentially affecting "school curricula, college admission and articulation standards, state graduation requirements, test specifications, and especially the goals for school reform efforts." He writes that, as he worked with committees on this nationwide effort, "I drew on my experiences in honors."

> When teaching honors seminars, I had often asked participants to repeat the point made by the previous discussant before launching into their own comments. Sometimes we asked the previous discussants whether their comments had been accurately summarized. Such "reciprocal paraphrase" was intended, first, to encourage the students to listen to each other and to build their own thinking on that of others. Secondly, I hoped that the students, by learning to recognize differences among their own views, would come to differentiate between what they initially expected a text to say and what it would turn out to mean.

Teaching honors seminars taught him the strategies that were useful in working with the College Board committees: "I learned never to let an idea pass that I did not understand, always to interrogate it, paraphrase it, and try to work out a mutual understanding." This kind of thinking and rethinking, a complement to "reciprocal paraphrase," taught him the practical value of what he had learned in honors as a "potent basis for coming together."

The values underlying Herbert's essay find echoes many times over in the values that college and university presidents prize in their honors programs and colleges: critical thinking; problem-solving; collaboration; diversity of perspectives and opinions; and communities of trust, respect, and understanding. Like James Herbert, most see the practical benefits of such values at the core of what distinguishes honors education at every kind of academic institution.

The thirty-nine essays by college and university presidents selected for publication represent a diverse range of institutions, from two-year schools (Illinois Valley Community College) to flagship research universities (University of Nevada, Reno) and from small liberal arts colleges of under a thousand students (Emory & Henry College) to institutions with over 60,000 students (Broward College). The institutions span the globe from California (Orange Coast College) to the Netherlands (Windesheim University of Applied Sciences). They include HBCUs such as North Carolina A&T State University, faith-based institutions like Oral Roberts University, and at least one women's college (Columbia College).

The presidents describe honors colleges and programs that are as diverse as their host institutions. The programs range in size from under 200 at Westminster College in Utah to over 2,200 at West Virginia University; they differ in age from 10 years old at Cal Poly Pomona to 52 at LIU Post; and they differ in their admissions and retention criteria, curricular requirements, methods of selecting faculty, extracurricular opportunities, scholarship offerings, and fundraising goals. From all this diversity, though, emerges remarkable unanimity about the value of honors in higher education.

CRITICAL THINKING

One value of honors identified by virtually every college and university president is critical thinking or, in the much fresher and more compelling phrase of James Herbert, "thinking and rethinking." Like Herbert, the president of James Madison University affirms the practical as well as moral and intellectual value of this kind of thinking, which for him also had its roots

in his honors experience as an undergraduate and which he has cultivated throughout his legal career. The benefit of honors at his university is that students learn "to be active citizens in an increasingly diverse democracy and to compete in a global economy" within a climate that encourages "diversity of thought and perspective."

The presidents of two liberal arts colleges also affirm the validity of Herbert's argument. The president of Columbia College picks up on what Herbert calls "reciprocal paraphrase," or "rethinking one's own or another's thoughts," to describe a characteristic of honors students that will resonate with most deans and directors: "They think and rethink, applying their own ideas while, as genuine honors critical thinkers, remaining open to the ideas of others and to the lessons of experience both inside and outside the classroom." The president of another liberal arts school, Westminster College, also claims a central place in honors for the rethinking that Herbert describes "because we see anew through the eyes of others," and this is "perhaps the most valuable asset we provide in education; it complicates and deepens our beliefs, forces us to see the world for the complex place it is, and helps us develop empathy for others."

Honors at universities and colleges of all sizes and all demographics echoes the intellectual, moral, and practical value of thinking and rethinking. The president of Loyola University, for instance, writes, "We must graduate these students with the ability to listen to and engage with divergent opinions, to effect workable compromises and solutions, and with a moral compass tuned to the ethical implications of actions." The president of Ball State University quotes Charlie Slavin, who in *JNCHC* described this kind of thinking as "intellectual risk-taking." At Ball State, as at many other universities, this approach to learning is characteristic of faculty and staff as well as students so that honors serves as an ongoing resource for faculty development.

In a terse and eloquent summary of the value of "thinking and rethinking," the president of the Community College of Allegheny County writes: "One overarching theme in honors interactions is that good ideas shared beget great ones. . . ."

COMMUNITY

A big part of what makes thinking and rethinking possible is a diverse community in which relationships can deepen over time, and honors provides just such a community on most campuses. This sense of community is a motif that runs through all of the essays on the value of honors. As the

chancellor of the University of Illinois at Springfield says, "The honors program is a community with a culture all its own." This culture then fans out into the institution to benefit the whole campus, a virtually universal phenomenon noticed and appreciated by all the presidents.

The community of honors starts with students and faculty, but a theme that presidents repeat over and over again is that this community extends out into the world, starting with the home campus and its surrounding area. All the students in the honors college at Wayne State University, for instance, dedicate a substantial effort as undergraduates to cultural involvement and social service in the metropolitan area of Detroit so that the city is a fundamental part of their education.

In a different context, the president of the University of Alaska describes the three campuses of the university and the distinct contributions that each of them makes to the state of Alaska. Each of the campuses has an honors program that suits the mission of its institution, and at the same time they all collaborate to share their strengths. As individual and also complementary programs, these three honors experiences disseminate the talents of their students throughout the state and help to retain these talented students in Alaska after they graduate.

Many presidents focus on the importance of place as fundamental to a sense of community. The new NCHC monograph *Housing Honors* provides detailed information about honors housing and community space along with numerous examples demonstrating the wide variety of approaches and resources. Several college and university presidents have also focused on the importance of honors space. The president of Grand Valley State University describes the Glenn Niemeyer Learning and Living Center, for instance, which "houses 450 students in well-appointed apartments and incorporates excellent classroom space as well as faculty and administrative offices." LIU Post has an especially posh center of community, with honors offices and classrooms housed in the historic Winnick House, former home of Marjorie Merriwether Post.

ACCESS AND DIVERSITY

While many honors programs and colleges represented in this Forum attract cosmopolitan students who could easily be admitted to any university in the country, quite a few regional schools have the interesting opportunity to work with students who may never have traveled far from their hometowns and who have not had the chance yet to stretch their minds and horizons.

The particular pleasures of working with such students are fundamental to, for instance, the honors program at Eastern Kentucky University, where a student from Monkey's Eyebrow (a real place in Kentucky) can emerge from college feeling ready "to compete on a national stage."

Honors programs at colleges that welcome an underserved population of students typically cherish the opportunity to include this group of students in the honors community. The president of Stephen F. Austin State University, for instance, writes that, given the university's make-up of 50% first-generation students, "we at SFA are able to help an underserved population whose success is central to meeting the local, national, and international challenges of the future. To meet these challenges, SFA encourages transformative learning experiences, a culture of engagement, undergraduate research, and a focus on lifelong learning. . . ."

The president of Cal Poly Pomona expresses a policy that her university shares with many others:

> [Honors applicants] may not have had a privileged educational background during their primary and secondary schooling, and sometimes this is reflected in quantitative measures such as lower GPAs and test scores. Instead of relying heavily on just these quantitative measures, we seek additional evidence of characteristics such as passion, determination, openness to new ideas, and aspiration to succeed in their essays and during the admission process.

She goes on to write, "Although we would wish to provide this experience for everyone, and we surely miss some promising students, honors programs and colleges exist to do the best that a university can do within its means and limited resources."

The president of West Virginia University adds another dimension to the question of access when he distinguishes between "elite" and "elitism":

> When honors colleges deliver on their promises, they are being anti-elitist. I know that many honors colleges and programs struggle with perceptions of elitism on their campuses, but we should never mistake an elite education for an elitist one. When you look at it from a different angle, at the way a strong honors college or program can affect the whole campus, especially one with a mission for access and service, you get a different result.

ACTIVE LEARNING

Long before the rest of higher education started to focus serious attention on active learning and experiential education, they have been hallmarks of the NCHC and honors education, primarily through the programs initiated by Bernice Braid of LIU Brooklyn starting in 1976, and they remain a prominent feature of honors programs and colleges today. Both campuses of LIU continue to be leaders in this area: the City as Text™ program created by Bernice Braid of LIU Brooklyn and the Partners in the Parks program created by Joan Digby of LIU Post are both staples on their home campuses as well as signature programs of the NCHC. These programs not only attract hundreds of students and faculty members to numerous sites around the country each year, but their pedagogy has been adopted, adapted, and stolen by countless honors programs and colleges not just in the U.S.—one example among many being Southeastern Oklahoma State University—but also in countries like the Netherlands.

Other forms of active learning, ranging from internships to study abroad to service learning projects, are integral to almost all honors experiences. Shaw University, for instance, has sponsored a ten-week residential internship at the University of the West Indies, where honors students study the attitudes, behaviors, and risk perceptions associated with prostate cancer and screening among Jamaican men.

INNOVATION

Often serving as incubators of new ideas on campus, honors typically is a place on campus that experiments with new courses, projects, and pedagogies. Interdisciplinary courses, team teaching, community service projects, peer counselling, cooperative student/faculty research: often these experiences take place first in an honors program and then radiate out into the university at large. One example is the Internship Initiative Program at Emory & Henry College, which first matched honors students with mentors from the Board of Trustees and then evolved into Project Ampersand, which matched current students with alumni and facilitated internships, externships, and mentorships for students across the campus. In this and other instances, "an honors program initiative revealed valuable opportunities that we could scale up to advance the education of all of our students."

Virtually all presidents agree on the value that honors adds to the entire campus and community, not just to students in the program. Honors students

who have caught fire with new ways of learning then fan out across campus, enhancing the quality of courses in all disciplines.

The kinds of innovations that occur in honors colleges and programs typically blend tradition and new directions, combining awareness of historical roots with constant "thinking and rethinking" in the discovery of new contexts and applications for old knowledge. Georgia State University, for instance, was originally a business school and now taps into an entrepreneurial spirit to send students out into the community to do internships. Similarly, Iona College remains true to the tradition of the Irish Catholic Christian Brothers while adapting its curriculum to include the STEM disciplines and to prepare its students for the careers of the future. In such ways, innovation does not occur in a vacuum but honors its context.

INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT

Three of the many ways that honors advances the interests of the institution in which it is housed are retention, fundraising, and alumni relations.

High retention rates are typical in honors programs and colleges, often helping to increase retention rates institution-wide and also creating a financial benefit through the added tuition. For instance, at Loyola University New Orleans, the president reports a 30% higher six-year graduation rate for honors students than for the general undergraduate population, yielding a financial benefit to the university. The impact on retention rates is perhaps even greater at two-year institutions. At LaGuardia Community College, "the three-year graduation rate among the fall 2011 freshman [honors] cohort is 55% versus 12% of the baseline cohort."

In addition to the indirect financial benefits of higher retentions rates, honors colleges and programs attract major contributions and endowments, and they can often set the pace for campus-wide fundraising efforts. The honors college at South Dakota State University, for instance, was the first college in the university to attract a named endowment and served as a model for the other colleges to seek and propose endowments. Valparaiso University has also documented higher levels of giving by honors graduates than by other alumni of the university.

Financial gifts are an important benefit of alumni involvement, but honors graduates support their colleges in many other ways as well, generally staying far more connected to their undergraduate institution than non-honors students. The president of Nova Southeastern University writes, "Each spring more than fifty honors alumni return to campus for our NSU Honors

Banquet, sharing stories of their experiences in college and the real world with current students. Our alumni have also started to give back to NSU by donating to support student scholarships, an admirable tradition that is well established at other honors institutions."

In addition to financial donations, honors alumni provide a range of services to current honors students, providing mentoring programs and guest lectures at, among others, Southeastern Oklahoma State University, South Dakota State University, and Shaw University. Many presidents also cite the success of their alumni and their importance as role models for current students. One president—from Monroe College—demonstrated the value of alumni to his college by using their words to describe the honors program.

Honors colleges and programs often maintain an active relationship with their alumni, reaching out to them as well as inviting them back to campus, extending the honors experience into the future to make it genuinely lifelong. Valparaiso University's honors college, for instance, organizes alumni reading groups in major metropolitan areas, providing syllabi that echo the kind of learning that graduates had done in their honors courses on campus.

PRIDE

A habit that is universal among honors directors and deans is bragging about their programs, a habit that they share with their presidents. Some presidents brag about high minimum SAT/ACT scores, as at Western Kentucky University, and at least as many brag about the broad access to honors that they offer to all students on their campus, as at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands.

Presidents and deans/directors take justified pride in their programs and especially in their honors students, often describing them as a way of praising their programs, as do the presidents of Broward College, Shaw University, and the University of North Georgia. In fact, the major editorial deletions that occurred in the making of this issue of *JNCHC* were aimed at reducing long, long lists of accomplished honors students and alumni.

Honors students benefit from this pride taken in them by learning to take pride in themselves. As the president of Texas A&M University – Commerce points out eloquently, being acknowledged as an honors student is already a validation of gifts that, in middle and high school, tend to be overshadowed by athletes and student leaders, who get all the accolades. Most honors programs not only bestow this special pride on students by admitting them but then nurture it throughout the students' undergraduate careers. As the

president of LaGuardia Community College says, "Our honors philosophy of helping students own their learning process and educational experience gives students a sense of agency in their lives that builds their self-esteem and self-confidence and allows them to see their limitless potential." She goes on to say, "Cultivating a community of support is essential in planting these seeds of excellence."

TRANSFORMATION

One word that perhaps recurs more than any other except "honors" is "transformation." Honors changes lives.

The president of Rogers State University describes the dramatic transformations that occur among honors students who, on arriving at the university, have never ventured far from their small Oklahoma hometowns but who become eager travelers after active-learning experiences that take them overseas, and the president at Northern Kentucky University describes the transformative experience of close personal relationships with peers and faculty mentors.

The president of Virginia Commonwealth University makes the point eloquently that the transformations we engender in honors students expand out to transform the global community for which honors prepares them: "The primary purpose of higher education, especially an honors education, must always be changing the world by changing lives. The ideas and innovations that occur on our campuses every day—in laboratories, clinics, studios, classrooms, and dorm rooms—are the catalysts that will transform humanity."

At the heart of this transformation are the thinking and rethinking that take place in honors programs, the habit of reflection, the widening of horizons that comes from listening to other people, listening again, and learning to listen to yourself. In seminars, in group projects, in City as Text™ excursions and writings, in collaborative service projects, and even in committee work, honors students form an approach to the world that will have intellectual, moral, and practical value throughout their careers and lives.

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The presidents' essays expressed unanimity on a wide range of other specific benefits they find in honors education, such as interdisciplinary teaching and learning, leadership opportunities, and lifelong learning. In addition, they virtually all mention the features that the forthcoming 2015 Gallup-Purdue Index lists as harbingers of success after college: "Graduates fared better

if, during college, they did any one of these: developed a relationship with a mentor; took on a project that lasted a semester or more; did a job or internship directly connected to their chosen field; or became deeply involved in a campus organization or activity (as opposed to minimally involved in a range of things)" (Frank Bruni, "How to Measure a College's Value," *New York Times* 12 September 2015). Honors programs provide their students with not just one but all of these benefits to their lives both in and beyond college.

The wealth of knowledge and appreciation of honors expressed by the thirty-nine presidents in the essays published here are surely gratifying to honors deans and directors and to all the students, faculty, and staff as well as administrators who know firsthand the value of honors. Just as striking is the consensus about what produces this value, making this collection not just an affirmation of the role that honors plays in higher education but a road map to making honors as good as it can be—a map that helps to show the way for the National Collegiate Honors Council in its next fifty years.